



Frost Laura, The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents (review)

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FROST Laura, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents*

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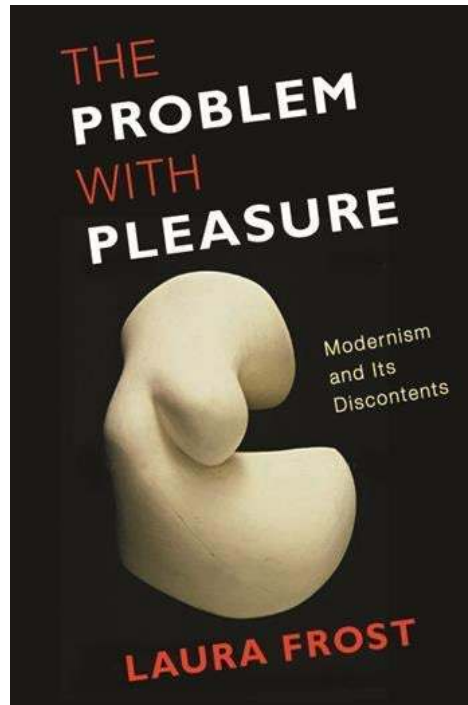
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Frost Laura, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013 (x + 304 pages). ISBN: 978-0231152723

- 1 This ambitious study is a welcome contribution to modernist research in that it offers an original discussion of the tensions between highbrow and lowbrow literary production at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 2 Laura Frost's premise is that it is more productive to view the paradigmatic modernist divide between the high/low or elite/popular culture in terms of generative tensions rather than competing dichotomies. In the context of the post-First World War years, mass entertainment, including the cinema, popular novels and magazines, provided the public with immediate and somatic pleasures that modernists decried as being shallow and threatening to culture. Coupled to this so-called repudiation of easy pleasure is the modernist literary posture which consists in writing for an elite readership. Indeed, it has already been widely argued that modernist texts confront readers with language that is as demanding and disturbing as it is captivating and rewarding. Significantly, in 'Metaphysical Poets,' T. S. Eliot contends that poets must be difficult (20) and Joyce, in an interview for *Harper's Magazine*, speaks of the demands he makes of his reader (20). Summing up the general view on such aesthetic praxis, the critic Lionel Trilling uses Freud's term 'unpleasure' (a translation of the German 'Unlust', 23) to describe the modernist antagonistic relation to and complex representation of pleasure.
- 3 In her study, Frost sets out to show that 'the fundamental goal of modernism is the redefinition of pleasure' (3). Building on Trilling's use of 'unpleasure', she introduces a new twist by contending that 'modernists disavow but nevertheless engage with the pleasures they otherwise reject' (3) by aesthetically experimenting with textual effects to fashion challenging but gratifying reading experiences. Thus by destabilizing the binary opposition between high and low culture, Frost reassesses the readerly affects that modernist texts stimulate and the cognitive and somatic gratification obtained from arduous reading, since, as Roland Barthes writes in 'The Pleasure of the Text', the body also responds to the reading experience.
- 4 The compelling introduction, which includes a survey of the shades of meaning of the word 'pleasure' over the centuries from the Hedonist and Epicurean philosophies to recent studies in neurosciences, is followed by seven chapters and a coda, each devoted to a different writer and the specific readerly unpleasure they engage with. In each chapter, Frost diligently grounds the development of textual challenges to readers in the literary, cultural and historical contexts of the time. She also cleverly examines the demands on the senses of evolving technical specificities of silent films (chapter 6) and the talkies (chapter 4) and relates them to the demands of modernist texts.
- 5 Offering an original start, the sense of smell, which is both reflexive and somatic, is the focus of the analysis of James Joyce's works, and of *Ulysses* in particular. Like Joris-Karl



Huysman in his novel *À Rebours* (1884), Joyce is shown to challenge the conception of odour as extralinguistic, more specifically in his use of the compositional notes of perfume hinged on shifts in point of view to depict the relationship between characters. A detailed history of perfume over the centuries conjures up the binaries opposing the healthy and the infectious, the herbal and the animal, the elegant and the cheap, the natural and the synthetic which have dictated attitudes to odours. But the paradox of perfume undermines such binaries since a scent can combine herbal fragrances with others originating from excremental (ambergris) or glandular (musk, civet) animal sources, thereby blending the clean and the dirty. Tensions between binaries are played out in *Ulysses* where Bloom is shown to find bodily odours both appealing and repulsive whereas the distinctive voluptuous fragrance of opoponax that Molly likes is both pleasant and off-putting. Additionally, Frost contends that meaning in Joyce's texts is diffuse, like perfume, the reader having to pay attention to the construction of language itself like one pays attention to the compositional notes of a perfume. Joyce's use of perfume is not only thematic then. In fact, the linguistic play embedded in the Joycean syntax disrupts the reader's sensuous engagement with the text to elicit a more complex and rewarding readerly pleasure.

- 6 Similarly somatic and extra-verbal, tickling provides Frost with a useful analogy to analyze how Gertrude Stein's writing induces readerly unpleasure. Both exciting and annoying, and also regressive and childish, tickling mixes pleasure and pain and combines reflex and social interaction. Frost picks out many instances illustrating the irritating stop and start quality of Stein's prose/poetry and of her lectures that evokes tickling. Negations, repetitions, unconventional punctuation, and disorienting changes in rhythm thwart the readers' expectations and force them to pay attention to the sound and structure of language.
- 7 'Orgasmic Discipline' is the title of the chapter devoted to D. H. Lawrence's engagement with the high/low cultural divide. Frost teases out of both the plot and language of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the clichés specific to the popular desert romance genre which stages exotic attractive-repulsive sexuality. E. M. Hull's 1919 novel *The Sheik* in particular provides the dynamic binaries of 'knowledge and denial, physical sensation and ethical indignation' (Frost 96) which characterize the genre. Lawrence, who derides the figure of the sheik with a whip in his essay 'Surgery for the Novel—Or a Bomb' (1923), is shown to deploy the clichés of such interwar popular fiction in order to achieve a form of parody in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Frost claims that, while elsewhere his idiosyncratic repetitions and authorial interruptions contribute to building an arduous readerly experience, in this novel the stereotypes and popular romance strategies attract the reader's attention away from the acts on the page back to the text as language. Thus the readerly experience comes under control to 'discipline and even curtail' pleasure (90).
- 8 Mass entertainment took a new turn with the advent of the 'talkies' which stimulated the senses of sight and hearing simultaneously. Frost examines how the new demands on spectators are amplified in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where the cinema is presented as a 'somatic medium' (132) which appeals to all the senses except taste. In his study of Huxley's novel, Theodor Adorno has pinpointed how the totalitarian regime's prescribed sexual behaviour 'denies [pleasure] by granting it' (qd 136). Frost pursues the discussion by focusing on the spectators of 'feelies' to disclose how Huxley conceptualizes the manipulative function of pleasure. Indeed, in this 'negative

utopia' (135), in order to produce docile citizens, the feelies propose engineered pleasure to movie-goers whose senses are roused simultaneously so that, in Huxley's words, there is 'no leisure from pleasure' (qd 135). Frost traces the feelies' licentious scenes, their racial exoticism and fetishism back to popular romance novels and films, such as Elinor Glyn's best-sellers *Three Weeks* (1907) and *It* (1927), and 'The Jazz Singer' directed by Alan Crosland (1927). She also interestingly reveals how these episodes are juxtaposed with quotations from Shakespeare which represent 'the lost values of refined and literary culture' (146). This dichotomy between high and low culture is not so clear-cut however. Indeed, while acknowledging the ambiguity of the term 'Moor', Frost also reads Shakespeare's *Othello* as the possible intertext to one of the feelies which dramatizes racial otherness and miscegenation.

- 9 After this examination of pleasure saturated by the somatic appeal of the feelies, Frost looks at another aspect of intoxication relating it to what she identifies as the celebration of anhedonia in the interwar fiction of Patrick Hamilton and Jean Rhys. Frost accounts for the inclusion, in her study, of these authors from the margins of modernism, arguing that their fiction captures 'the dysphoria of their moment by registering a protest against pleasure' (163). The concept of pleasure is said to be redefined as the characters' search for obliteration and debasement stimulates a range of 'ugly feelings', a phrase borrowed from Sianne Ngai (164). Thus, Frost foregrounds how intoxication, one of 'the master metaphors of modernist scorn for mass culture' (240), is literally staged in scenes of inebriation, and how pleasure turns to unpleasure when sex entails prostitution. The reworking of the concept of pleasure is instantiated by the intertextual link between a film introduced in Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. The reference draws a parallel between the poet's understanding of the sublime which taps into instinctive impulses and Rhys's depiction of a voluntary quest for unpleasure. The linguistic play of Hamilton's and Rhys's texts also points to the equivocal nature of the pleasures the characters seek and repudiate. Claustrophobic narrative circles, black humour, and fragmented forms all contribute to altering the value of pleasure and of its correlative, pain, and to exploring, in some scenes, the tensions inherent to sadomasochism. Consequently, resistance to pleasure as it is staged in Hamilton's and Rhys's fiction creates readerly discomfort, pushing 'readers to their limits of tolerance' (166). Such an effect leads Frost to question the cathartic value of these authors' fiction.
- 10 In her novels, Rhys engages with women's ambivalence towards pleasure, an attitude which stems from the requirements of social conventions and which often leads to unvented frustration. In a different register, American novelist and screenwriter Anita Loos plays with the clichés of femininity as shown in the final chapter of the study which looks at her most famous novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*. Loos, who was also a scriptwriter, rose to prominence thanks to her witty subtitles inserted in silent films. Early in her career, she endeavoured to distinguish herself from other subtitle writers by creating an active cinema audience; to do so she 'routinely disrupt[ed] visual pleasure and pu[t] in its place the pleasure of the text' (228). For instance, one of her famous subtitles announces 'Count Xxerkzsxxv', a name 'you can only think' (qd 230). Frost argues that the novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* owes its visual quality to Loos's scriptwriting style coupled with her engagement with the dichotomy between high and low culture, an engagement which is in line with modernists' preoccupations. Indeed, the narrator Lorelei Lee, who is stereotyped as a typist, has 'ambishion' (qd 211) and travels to see the 'Eyefull

Tower' (qd 210). Thanks to the visual wordplay, the cultural divide is thematically and linguistically embedded in the text.

- 11 To finish, Frost offers new avenues of thought by looking at post-modernists' responses to the modernist redefinition of pleasure. She suggests that postmodern metafiction, as in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, provides the means to reassess the legacy of modernism's anxiety about the advent of 'prosthetic pleasure' (236) and to read this legacy in terms of 'productive tension' (244). This coda concludes a highly accessible study which balances theoretical and biographical background with new original readings; its crisp style is served by witty lexical precision, as exemplified in Frost's personal response to the phonological modulations of the term 'pleasure': 'I hear a plosive that relaxes into a sinuous buzz followed by a purr' (7).
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